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A

SERMON,

PREACHED AT STOUGHTON,

May 22, 1808.

THE LAST TIME OF ASSEMBLING IN THE

Old Meeting House.

7551.275

BY EDWARD RICHMOND, A. M.
MINISTER OF SAID TOWN.

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SERMON.

ECCLESIASTES III. 3.

A TIME TO BREAK DOWN, AND A TIME TO BUILD UP.

IN these words the object of the royal preacher was to express the transient and mutable nature of sublunary objects. The vanity and vicissitudes of the world are the themes on which he dwelt through this whole book; and on these themes he dwelt with great force and peculiar sensibility. Never are people so eloquent as when they speak or write experimentally; and never so copious and pertinent as when they discuss subjects with which they are deeply impressed. This was remarkably the case of the wise king Solomon, the author of this book. Upon the vanity of the world, and the mutability of sublunary scenes, no person ever discoursed more feelingly, nor more eloquently. Of this, one great reason was, he wrote experimentally. He was deeply impressed with a sense of what he wrote. If contentment, satisfaction and happiness, were attainable in the present state of existence, they must have fallen to the lot of the wise king of Israel. Born to affluence and honour, endued with superior understanding, possessing the affection and confidence of his subjects, and by his wisdom and glory, attracting the applause and admiration of the world, he commanded every source from which human felicity can be expected to flow. But all was inadequate to the attainment of the object pursued. Learning, pleasure, wealth and honour, were found, by experience, to be but vanity. 'I made me great works,' says he,

'I builded me houses, I planted me vineyards, I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit. I made me pools of water. I got me servants and maidens. I had great possessions, above all that were in Jerusalem before me. I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces. I gat me men-singers and women-singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem. Whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy: for my heart rejoiced of all my labour, and this was my portion of all my labour.'

How happy, we are ready to exclaim, how happy must Solomon have been! And how happy should we be, were all our wishes thus gratified, and all our wants thus amply supplied! Solomon once possessed the same sentiment. But having made the experiment, his ideas were altered. Experience dispelled the illusion which the imagination had spread over sublunary objects. 'Then I looked,' says he, 'on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do, and behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.'

These objects and possessions which, with so much ardour he had pursued, and with so much labour acquired, were found to be not only vain and vexatious, but of very short duration. As there was a time when they all had a beginning, so there was a time also, when they all had an end. 'To every thing,' says he in the beginning of our context, 'there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die: a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which was planted: a time to kill, and a time to heal: a time to break down, and a time to build up.'

The mutability and short duration of earthly things are the subject of the ensuing discourse.

All material things are subject to change. Nothing is permanent. This remark holds true, whether applied

to the productions of human art and industry, or to what is generally styled, 'The works of nature.'

Man himself being imperfect and mutable, it is not to be wondered at, that all his works partake of his imperfection and mutability. Man cannot, indeed, *create*. He is unable to give existence to the materials of which his works are composed. But furnished, by the hand of the great Creator, with materials suited to his purpose, he forms and fashions them according to his intention, and adjusts them to the particular end he has in view. It is, therefore, rational to conclude, that structures erected by the hand of man must be less durable than the materials of which they are formed. Yet those materials themselves are perishable, constantly dissolving and passing into new forms. Whatever, therefore, is composed by such a workman, and of such materials, it were natural to suppose, cannot be of long duration.

On this subject, however, there is no necessity of recurring to abstract and philosophical reasoning. Experience and observation sufficiently demonstrate the fact now under consideration.

Frequently, indeed, do human productions long outlive their authors. Wherever we turn our eyes, we observe traces of hands, which now moulder in the dust. Walking over our farms we meet with many a vestige of improvement, made by our departed ancestors. We observe, perhaps, fields which our fathers subdued and cultivated: we find fences which they made: we find heaps of stones which they collected: we find trees which they planted, under whose shadow they reclined, and of whose fruit they partook. Many of our habitations were built and occupied by those, who now inhabit the lonely mansions of the dead. This house of public worship was erected by the hands, and at the expense, of a generation, the greater part of which has long since passed away.

But though human labours may long survive the hand by which they were performed, they must ere long have an end. Whatever mankind do must be undone. Whatever they erect must be demolished. The stones

which they gather together must be cast away. The edifices which they build up must be broken down. Fields, once enclosed and cultivated, are now become desolate: 'the hedges thereof are broken down, and they are laid waste.' What was once an elegant habitation, is now become a heap of rubbish: and of many ancient edifices not even a trace is left, by which their situation can be discovered. "We cannot travel far upon the earth without being presented with many a striking memorial of the changes made by the hand of time. What was once a flourishing city is now a neglected village. Where castles and palaces stood, fallen towers and ruined walls appear. Where the magnificence of the great shone, and the mirth of the gay resounded, there, as the prophet Isaiah describes, the owl and the raven now dwell, thorns come up, and the nettle and the bramble grow in the courts.'

To the same mutability every thing human is subjected. How many changes do we experience in our social and civil state! Connexions formed with the highest expectations are soon severed. Children, trained up with affection and tender anxiety, are cut down by the resistless stroke of death. Societies, with which we connect ourselves, are, sooner or later, dissolved. All human institutions, whether civil or religious, are in time subverted. Forms of government are changed. The sovereignty and independence of states are overthrown. Nations, which at one period are 'exalted to heaven,' are, at another, 'thrust down to hell.' The power which, in one age, extends its terror, its glory and its conquest over the world, in another, becomes harmless and contemptible. The political history of man presents to our view unceasing changes, and perpetual revolutions.

Not the monuments of art only, but the works of nature, partake of this mutability. Vegetable and animal life has its period. Even man, the noblest work of God in this lower world, is born to die. 'He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also, as a shadow, and continueth not.' The earth is continually changing its inhabitants. 'One generation passeth

away, and another generation cometh.' This mortal frame which, but a few years since, was built up by the hand of the supreme Architect, must gradually decay, and eventually be broken down. Not only the fashion of this world, and the generations of men, are passing away, but the world itself is constantly and rapidly approximating to a close. 'The heavens and the earth which are now, are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment, and perdition of ungodly men. The day of the Lord will come: Then the heavens shall depart as a scroll, when it is rolled together, and every mountain and island shall be removed out of their places, and the earth, and the works which are therein, shall be burnt up.'

So evident is the truth of our doctrine, that more needs not be said for its illustration and proof. Some reflections, however, are suggested by the subject, which merit our attention.

In the first place, let it be remarked, that this mutability to which the works of nature, and the monuments of art are subjected, furnishes no conclusive argument that the world was created, or is governed, by chance, or by a mutable and imperfect Being. The vicissitudes and revolutions, attending all sublunary things, are under the direction of infinite wisdom, and the control of almighty power; and constitute a part of the great scheme of divine Providence. No creature is brought into existence without being made to answer some important purpose: no event is permitted to take place, which cannot be rendered subservient to the designs of Deity. Every actor brought forward on the stage, however short the part assigned him, is not a useless character in the great drama of life. Notwithstanding the transient and changing nature of all terrestrial things, the remark of the royal preacher still holds true; 'I know that whatsoever God doth, it shall be forever: nothing can be put to it, nor any thing taken from it.'

In the next place, it may be remarked, that our subject is adapted to disengage our hearts from the world.

If all sublunary objects are transient and mutable, they ought not to possess our supreme affection, nor excite our noblest energies. Soon to be deprived of all temporal advantages, let us aspire to acquisitions, not subject to the power of chance, nor within the reach of change. It is our wisdom not to labour anxiously, for 'the meat that perisheth; but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life.' If all our worldly possessions must be soon taken from us; it should be our primary and principal concern to obtain that *good part*, those *durable riches*, of which we can never be deprived; and to become 'partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and that fadeth not away.' 'The glorious gospel of the blessed God' presents to our view, and proposes to our acceptance, objects which the hand of time can neither change, nor wrest from us. Heaven and immortality never grow old nor decay. The future state of the righteous experiences no change, except from one degree of happiness and glory to another. How pertinent, then, how important, are the injunctions of an inspired apostle. 'Seek those things which are above:' 'Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth.'

We again observe, that though all things, in this sublunary world, are subject to change and dissolution, yet we have no reason to doubt the unchangeable goodness of God, nor to distrust the perpetual care of divine Providence. Amidst the vicissitudes of life, the fluctuations of the world, and the revolutions of time, the Almighty remains the same. 'With him there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' Though he changes all things, himself remains the unchangeable God. 'Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thy hands: they shall perish, but thou shalt endure; yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shall thou change them, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end.'

To the devout and pious mind, the eternity and immutability of God are subjects of pleasing contemplation. Amid the commotions of the world, *He is the Rock*, and the only rock, to which we can look for support, and the only foundation, on which we can safely rest. 'He has been our dwelling place in all generations, and a very present help in time of trouble. We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what work thou didst in their days, in the times of old.'

To the choice of the present subject, and to many of the preceding remarks, I have been led by an occurrence, not indeed very important in itself; but rendered interesting by many of its attendant circumstances. In this ancient temple of the Lord, we are now assembled for the last time. Several years have already elapsed, since it was generally thought expedient to break down this shattered edifice, and build up a new one: and though many were of a different opinion, imagining 'the time not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built,' yet the work was undertaken, and is now, at length, completed. This house, therefore, is to be forsaken, and, in a few days, to be levelled with the ground. However desirable the event, few, I am persuaded, can behold it with entire indifference. It is an event, trifling as it may appear to the giddy and the gay, peculiarly adapted to excite, in the contemplative mind, serious and useful reflections. It carries our thoughts back to 'the days of old, to the years of ancient time.'

Not a native of this place, I am sensible, that I cannot enter into all the feelings which you who were born here, and especially you who are advanced in age, and remember the building of this house, must experience on the present occasion. Having spent the greater number of the few years, which I have yet lived, in places remote from this, it may, with propriety, be said, that, in regard to the history of this society, 'I am of yesterday, and know nothing.' But so far as my information extends, I will endeavour to pursue such reflections, as, I am per-

suaded, wholly occupy your minds, and, in no small degree, my own.

Perceiving this house, which is nearly coeval with the formation of this society, about to be broken down, we are naturally led to a consideration of the period in which it was erected, and to the ancient history of the town.

The town of Stoughton was incorporated December 22, 1726. For a number of years, probably forty or fifty, prior to this date, there had been settlements in this place, then known by the name of Dorchester Village. The limits of the town were originally much more extensive, than at the present day. They embraced the towns of Canton, Sharon and a part of Foxborough. The earliest settlements were made in that part of the town which is now Canton. It was not until the year 1716, which was ninety two years ago, that any part of what is now the town of Stoughton was inhabited. Twenty seven years after the first settlements were made, viz, November 9th, 1743, this precinct was incorporated. Nine months afterwards, August 10th, 1744, a church was gathered: to form which thirty three members were dismissed from the first church in this town, now the church in Canton.

At that time, the society assembled for worship in private houses. Preparations, however, were making for a house of public worship. December 25, 1743, the precinct voted to build this house, in which we are now, for the last time, assembled. It was raised on the 18th and 19th days of June, in the following year. In less than a year it was so far completed, as to accommodate the society with a place for religious service. The first baptism in the meeting house was administered May 23, 1745. Whether this was the first time that a meeting was holden in it, is now uncertain. It is, therefore, sixty four years since this house was raised; and sixty three since the precinct assembled in it, for the purpose of divine worship.

The house was small; but sufficiently large for the population and ability of the precinct. Compared with

the circumstances of the society, it was much larger, and not less expensive, than the new house lately builded.

No sooner were the church and society formed, than measures were adopted and pursued for a settled ministry, and regular administration of christian ordinances. A little more than a month after the church was incorporated, a candidate was invited to be 'set over them in the Lord.' Mr. Thomas Jones, of Dorchester, was called by the church to take the oversight of them: but the precinct, being equally divided, were unable to obtain a vote of concurrence. The following year, viz. Sept. 6, 1745, the church, by a unanimous vote, chose to the pastoral office my venerable and worthy predecessor, Rev. Jedidiah Adams, a native of Braintree, now Quincy, with which vote the precinct unanimously concurred. He was ordained Feb. 19, 1746. He continued in the work of the ministry nearly forty six years. He lived a little more than seven years after being called from his public labours; and died Feb. 25, 1799, in the eighty ninth year of his age.

To you who are advanced in years, or are arrived even at the meridian of life, any remarks on the character which Mr. Adams, as a man, or a christian minister, sustained, would be useless. You knew this man of God, and remember him with affection. For the sake of the younger part of my audience, and those to whom he was a stranger, it may be observed, that his superior understanding, and extensive information; his amiable disposition, and deportment; the suavity and refinement of his manners; the correctness and excellency of his moral and religious character, endeared him to his friends and acquaintance, while living, and render his memory precious.*

During the ministry of Mr. Adams one hundred and fifty seven members were admitted to full communion in the church. The ordinance of baptism was administered to nine hundred and eight. Prior to his ministry

* See Note A.

there were seventeen baptisms; and since he relinquished his ministerial labours, there have been two hundred and sixty nine: so that the whole number of baptisms, since a church was formed in this place, has been about twelve hundred; and of admissions into the church about two hundred.

Reflecting on the period when this house was built, I have been agreeably impressed with the zeal and exertions manifested by this society, for the promotion of religion, and the support of public worship. This place, as we may well suppose, was then spersely inhabited; containing only here and there a house, surrounded and almost covered with the trees of the wood. The precinct contained but little more than one quarter of its present population, and a less proportion of property. Yet this small number, under embarrassments peculiar to new settlers, found means of building a house for the Lord: and though the house now appears small, yet, for them it was large, containing room for more than three times the usual number of worshippers. They not only consulted their own accommodation, but had respect to the generations which were coming after them.

In addition to the expense of building, they, at the same time, incurred the expense of settling a minister, for whose support they gave a salary, equal in value to what the parish now pays, though containing four times the number, and, perhaps, five times the wealth.

The circumstances, above mentioned, evince not the zeal only, but the unanimity, of our predecessors. Had there been any considerable number, who opposed, or endeavoured to obstruct the work, or even 'removed their shoulder from the burden,' the laudable exertions of the remainder must have proved ineffectual. In this respect, as in many others, they have left an example, worthy the attention and imitation of their posterity.

Reflecting on the period when this house was built, we must be deeply impressed with a consideration of the changes which have since taken place. I allude not to the changes which the world in general, and our own coun-

try in particular, have experienced; but to those which have occurred within the circle of this small society. Great have been the alterations and improvements in the natural face of the town. Where then was a lonely desert, we now behold cultivated fields, and blooming orchards. Where then was the gloomy cottage, we now behold the comfortable, perhaps, elegant mansion. Great has been the increase of population and property, great the accessions to the comforts and conveniences of life. With pleasure and gratitude may changes of this kind be contemplated; but by others painful and gloomy sensations are excited. Where is now the generation which once assembled in this house! Where are our fathers and predecessors, whose places we now fill, whose seats we now occupy? Gone are they, whither we must soon follow them, to that 'unexplored region, from whose bourne no traveller returns.' From this house they are removed to the 'house appointed for all the living.' Separated from this congregation, they are now united with the vast congregation of the dead. Our fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live forever? Of those who remember the building up of this house, and who were assisting in so good a work, there are, indeed, some who live to see it broken down: but their hoary locks, and wrinkled brows, demonstrate that the hand of time is pulling them also down. On the present occasion, peculiarly adapted to excite their tender sensibilities, they cannot but recal to their minds the companions of their youth, with whom they 'took sweet counsel and walked unto the house of God in company.' They observe a new generation risen up around them; they find themselves connected with a new society; in their public devotions they are united with a new congregation. For their former fellow-worshippers they must look in yonder lonely mansions of the dead, to which themselves also must soon be consigned.

The present occasion is adapted to excite serious reflections on the improvements we have made of the re-

ligious privileges enjoyed in this house, and on the manner in which we have discharged our respective duties. Here, the most of you have been baptized; here, you have all heard 'the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation;' here, you all have heard, if not united in the prayers of the church; here many of us have pledged ourselves, by a solemn covenant, to be the Lord's; at this table of the Lord, we have again and again partaken of the symbols of our ascended Saviour, and for the last time, in this house, and who knows, but for the last time in this world, have, to day, repeated this solemn transaction.——What account are we able to render of all our advantages? What advancement have we made in 'the new and divine life?' Are the blessings of the gospel here enjoyed, likely to prove a 'savour of life unto life; or a savour of death unto death?' Are there none now present, against whom the mouldering walls of this house bear testimony?——against whom 'the stone cries out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber answers it?'

Breaking down these walls, may we, at the same time, break down the walls, erected by sin, which separate us from the love of God, and from the light of his countenance. May we 'put off the old man with his deeds, and put on the new man;' that, 'as lively stones, we may be built up a holy temple unto the Lord.' Together with this house may we leave our old sinful habits, and vicious propensities: so that on entering the new house, now ready for our reception, we may carry with us new hearts, and new dispositions—dispositions of peace, harmony and love. Above all things, may we 'put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness, that we may keep the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace.' May we carry with us no passion which can pollute that sacred place, or offend the pure eye of that Supreme Majesty, whose presence we shall invoke, and to whom we shall consecrate the house.

Finally; contemplating the demolition of this ancient temple of the Lord, may we consider that the time is not far distant, when the temple of our body must also be demolished; when these earthly tenements must moulder back to dust. May we so improve the time and the talents, with which we are now indulged, that when 'this earthly house of our tabernacle shall be dissolved, we may have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.'